

OPINION

The third wave of the pandemic is here. Now what?

**ANDRÉ PICARD** >

PUBLISHED MARCH 22, 2021

UPDATED MARCH 23, 2021

 208 COMMENTS SHARE **A+** TEXT SIZE BOOKMARK 

The third wave is upon us, and it may prove to be the most challenging one yet.

Our actions – or inaction – in the coming days will determine whether this much-unwanted third wave is a ripple that we shrug off, or another brutal pounding of our crumbling psyches.

In many ways, wave three is a new, parallel pandemic. We’ve finally started to get a handle on coronavirus classic, but the variants of concern – faster-spreading and more deadly – are poised for a “hold my beer” moment.

Fewer than 5,000 cases of the variants (or, as they are formally known, B.1.1.7, B.1.351 and P.1) have been confirmed so far in Canada. That’s good.

But the numbers are doubling every seven days, and the R0 (pronounced “R-naught”) is troubling, about 1.4 for the most common variant, compared with 0.9 for the original COVID-19 virus. (Practically, that means every 10 people infected with a variant can infect 14 people, so cases rise; in contrast, 10 people with coronavirus classic can infect nine others.)

One variant, B.1.1.7, which was first detected in Britain, is now the dominant strain in Ontario, just as the much-maligned modellers predicted it would be.

We haven’t talked about doubling times since the early days of the pandemic last March. And, as we did a year ago, we find ourselves at a pivotal period in which, if we take our eyes off the

ball for even a moment, the numbers could soar.

The third wave was, more than its forebears, the preventable wave. To a certain extent, it still is.

After all, we have a whole year of COVID-19 experience. We know unequivocally how to keep cases down: swift, decisive action and patience. And this time around, we have an ace up our sleeves: vaccines.

But vaccines need time to work. We need to get them into people's arms. We need to do so in sufficient numbers so that it gets a lot more difficult for coronavirus to spread.

The coronavirus – especially the variant strains – doesn't need much time to spread. It just needs opportunity: more mingling in restaurants, workplaces, schools, businesses and backyards, or just through a general letting-down of our guard.

Time and time again, however, we have shown ourselves to be self-destructively impatient.

We've seen it again in recent days with several provinces easing public-health restrictions, and doing so just as cases begin to tick up again.

Canada is still averaging about 3,300 new COVID-19 cases every day. Where are all these people getting infected? We seem to have forgotten about basics such as contact tracing and isolating the infected.

Ontario, in the past two weeks, has seen daily case counts jump to an average of more than 1,500 daily from 1,000. Alberta has climbed to more than 500 a day from just more than 300. British Columbia is reporting almost as many daily cases as the much more populous province of Quebec.

Quebec is a good news story, at least on the surface. Its daily case counts are one-fifth of what they were in January, thanks to some tough curfews. Yet hospitalizations, and intensive-care cases in particular, remain stubbornly high.

COVID-19 isn't as deadly any more, but that's because it's hitting more young people. They don't die in large numbers but they do suffer greatly, with long periods in hospital and the risk of chronic illness that has come to be known as "long COVID."

The "nice" thing about COVID-19 is that it gives us plenty of warning. We need look no further than Europe to get a sense of how devastating a third wave could be.

Britain, the first country hit hard by a variant, was staggered before it got its huge vaccination campaign going. Now, Italy, Spain, France, Germany and others are locking down again. It's March, 2020, redux.

Using these real-life cases as a guide, modellers are warning what this could mean to Canada: Up to 3,500 cases a day in Ontario and 4,500 cases a day in Quebec by early April – three to four times what we have now – if we let our guard down like the overeager Europeans did.

It's hard to live our lives constantly on hold, but we need to keep an eye to the future. Holding off on reopenings even a bit could make a big difference a few weeks down the road. But do we have the stomach and the foresight for it?

If we're able to stifle the spread of variants and do a few million more vaccinations by Easter, that could blunt a third wave. We might even see a resurrection of real, lasting hope.

Sign up for the [Coronavirus Update newsletter](#) to read the day's essential coronavirus news, features and explainers written by Globe reporters and editors.

© Copyright 2021 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher